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Helen Wilkinson

# 'The New Heraldry': Stock Photography, Visual Literacy, and Advertising in 1930s Britain

*Britain in the 1930s saw both an increasing use of photography in advertisements and the development of advertising photographs as a distinct branch of the medium. Amongst specialist advertising photographers were 'stock' photographers, such as Photographic Advertising Limited. The survival of the firm's extensive photographic archive allows a unique opportunity to study advertising practice from the point of production. Stock images were taken for their mass appeal, and the rise of popular visual literacy is a striking feature of the period. Contemporary critics coined the phrase 'the new heraldry' to characterize those forms of commercial design which harnessed this new visual literacy. This article examines the work of Photographic Advertising Limited in the light of these phenomena.*

In modern advertising, effectiveness—by which I mean 'pulling power'—is often sacrificed to attractiveness, to advanced methods of presentation.<sup>1</sup>

Should advertisements be designed for attractiveness or effectiveness? The 1930s advertising commentator quoted above found the two qualities diametrically opposed. A study of professional advertising journals from the decade reveals many other critics and practitioners aligning themselves with extremes of the same debate. But for all its prevalence, setting attractiveness against effectiveness was a false dichotomy. Some companies' work was led both by the need to communicate effectively with an audience and by the recognition that this could be achieved through design techniques. Because of the bias of many contemporary sources, such as *Commercial Art*, it is easier for a historian to focus on design-led advertising, or the work of famous individual practitioners. In this article, I intend to take a broader view of the industry and consider a wider range of advertising by focusing on the work of one company which prioritized communication as well as design.

The 1930s saw an increase in the number of advertisements illustrated with photographs.

Commercial photography was a booming profession in Britain in the 1930s: in 1938 there were 800 commercial photographers in Britain, out of a total of 3,000 professional photographers.<sup>2</sup> Within commercial photography, advertising photography developed a distinct professional identity. There was an absence of aesthetic consensus among advertising photographers: contemporary professional journals are rich in polemic both from those who used experimental styles, and from those who deplored 'stunt' photography.<sup>3</sup> However, this debate is, in a sense, more indicative of the unity of the profession than its diversity. In the previous decade, advertising photographers could not have held such a debate because there was no forum for them to do so, and less of a sense of shared professional activity.

The bitter debates between traditionalists and certain innovators in the professional largely came about because of the prominence of modernist design, and modernist-influenced advertising photography. Modernist design was encouraged in advertising in the late 1920s and 1930s largely by one agency, Crawfords.<sup>4</sup> Clear typography, bold imagery, and a minimum of text were modernist innovations which eventually came into the

advertising mainstream. However, in their extreme form, they were thought to alienate certain audiences, hence the condemnation of design excesses and 'stunt photography'. In this article, I intend to explore the work of a photographic studio which drew on more populist sources to create a visual rhetoric which appealed to a large public. This studio, Photographic Advertising Limited, embodies many aspects of an exciting and transitional period in the history of British advertising.

Photographic Advertising was founded in 1926 and had a large and varied portfolio of clients. However, it also had a large library of stock photographs which is now in the collection at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television. The 20,000 photographs in the archive offer a unique opportunity to study advertising practice from the point of production, in addition to the more usual approach of considering advertisements as finished products. The advertisements in this article are taken from a survey of contemporary newspapers. With the exception of the Outspan advertisement [1], it has been impossible to trace advertisements including Photographic Advertising images, but the photographs in these advertisements could all have come from Photographic Advertising's library. They are presented alongside similar examples of the company's work in its 'raw' form.

#### Photographic Advertising's History

Photographic Advertising Limited was in business from 1926 to the late 1960s but was at its most prolific before the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> A medium-sized photographic studio, it had a high profile in the profession and won several industry prizes such as the Grand Prix at the Triennial International Exhibition of Modern and Decorative and Industrial Arts in Milan in 1934, beating many more famous names such as E. O. Hoppé and Yevonde Limited. The company was also a success commercially but is now almost completely unknown, and is not mentioned in any histories of the profession.

Photographic Advertising was founded by George Mewes and, although the company may have employed two or three other photographers,

# You'll enjoy Outspan oranges and grapefruit



## The Golden Fruit from South Africa

<sup>1</sup> Outspan advertisement, 1949

according to an estimate by his family, Mewes exercised firm stylistic control. The studio had a strong corporate identity, with all work credited to Photographic Advertising Limited rather than to individual photographers. Mewes had previously been a staff photographer with the *Daily*

*Mirror* and in this capacity had worked in Russia from 1914 to 1918, attached to the Russian army. He had returned to Russia during the Civil War in 1922 to work for the Save the Children Fund, using both film and photography to record the famine for fund-raising purposes. There is also anecdotal evidence that in the early 1920s Mewes spent a brief period of time in Hollywood. Whatever the truth of this, prior to founding Photographic Advertising, Mewes certainly worked for a British film company, the Castle Film company in Ealing, about which nothing more is known. When Photographic Advertising was founded in 1926, Mewes described his profession as 'film producer'.

At Photographic Advertising Limited, Mewes seems to have made some advertising films, building on his previous professional interests, but none of these survives. The rest of his company's time was divided between commissions and the stock library. Judging from the commissioned work which it has been possible to trace, Photographic Advertising seems to have specialized in travel, taking advertising photographs for Canadian Pacific among others. That only the stock library survives inevitably tends to distort the pattern of Photographic Advertising's work: it seems that in practice the stock library may have taken up less than half the company's time. In considering its stock work here, I do not intend to give the impression that Photographic Advertising was nothing more than a stock photographic agency.

### The Role of Stock Photography

Why should an advertiser choose to use stock photographic illustrations? A 1930s practitioner offered some reasons in a survey of the advertising photography profession:

There is another extremely useful group. It consists of studios who work on the stock photography system. This is popular because the buyer can see a range of prints at no cost and choose one that suits him. He may not save money buying in this way because the standard of picture is just as high and he must naturally bear the cost of access to large stocks, but he does save himself trouble and possible disappointment.<sup>6</sup>

It is not apparent from completed advertisements whether the photographs used were stock or commissioned. It is impossible to define a stock photograph in terms of any intrinsic characteristics: the images under consideration here can be classified as 'stock photographs' only in terms of their usage. At Photographic Advertising, photographs left over from a commission or the result of experimental sessions might be included in the stock library, along with photographs taken specifically for this purpose. To study stock photographs is therefore not to study a visual form so much as an aspect of industry practice.

The Photographic Advertising archive at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television (NMPFT) includes the sales ledgers for the stock library. A study of these offers an insight into the structure of the industry: for example, purchasers include advertising agencies such as Mather & Crowther and Pritchard Wood, but also manufacturing companies. This testifies to the developmental stage the 1930s represent in the history of the British advertising industry: it was clearly not yet the invariable practice to employ an advertising agency, and some companies would go direct to photographers and other service providers. Perhaps as a response to this, Photographic Advertising seems also to have undertaken some of the services now associated with advertising agencies, such as advising advertisers of possible story-lines and strategies. The ledgers also list sales of photographs to newspapers; these images were used to illustrate features, for example one photograph of a bride and groom was sold to the *Evening Chronicle* in August 1935 to illustrate an article entitled 'An engaged girl's diary'. As well as catering to the needs of a diverse range of purchasers in the UK, Photographic Advertising sold many of its images abroad. The studio had a close working relationship with agencies in several other countries, notably Holland, Switzerland, and the USA. These agencies seem to have bought material to include in their own stock libraries, and the relationship was reciprocal: some of the photographs in Photographic Advertising's stock library were purchased from other agencies. As this suggests, Photographic Advertising's aesthetic was carefully neutral: the studio developed

a realistic style which became its trademark. In Photographic Advertising's own publicity, the notion of realism was featured prominently and, in the 1930s, Photographic Advertising used the word 'realism' as a telegram address.

Another indication of the 'neutrality' of Photographic Advertising's work is the fact that the photographs were almost always altered by the purchasers, either by cropping, retouching, or with drawn additions. In its most extreme form, this manipulation might take the form of actually disguising the photographic nature of the image

to make it look like a drawing. A photograph purchased by Mather & Crowther from Photographic Advertising [2] in 1948 for use in an Outspan advertisement was adapted in this way. Although this is a relatively late example, from 1949, the practice was common in the 1930s and was widely advocated by some authorities.<sup>7</sup> In the finished advertisement (see [1]), the photograph has been inverted, the woman's clothes and hair have been changed, the champagne glass has been changed to a tumbler and the image has been reproduced with a screen which gives it the



2 Photographic Advertising stock sheet, including the image used as the basis for the Outspan advertisement (number 10783)

appearance of a drawing. The photograph has been treated as raw material, with no intrinsic prestige value. This advertisement offers an eloquent comment on the status of Photographic Advertising's work. Photographic modernism celebrated the essentially mechanical nature of the medium and accentuated the objectivity which photographs can achieve but which had been disguised by pictorial photographers with their romantic, painterly style. To modernists, the integrity of the image was crucial and they would not allow it to be undermined by retouching or cropping the negative.

The practice of using photographs almost as drawings seems less strange when one begins to appreciate how insubstantial the dividing line between photography and drawing was in terms of traditions of advertising illustration. When photographs first started to be used in press advertising, they were often slotted into an existing format, in place of a drawing. By the 1930s, much drawing in advertising was stylized or non-realistic and was often reserved for particular kinds of illustrations such as humour. In effect, the kind of photography practised by Photographic Advertising in the 1930s was the equivalent of earlier drawn illustrations: sentimental, realistic photographs inherited the graphic tradition, rather than contemporary commercial drawings. Modernist advertising photographers set out to distance themselves from this kind of realistic, narrative illustration but Photographic Advertising embraced it, along with other populist visual forms.

### Visual Rhetorics in the 1930s

Contemporary critics noted the importance of using images in advertising intended for a mass audience:

It has been truly said that before you can get a product into a customer's hands you have to get a picture of it into his mind. That is perfectly true, whether you use words for the purpose or a more direct method of illustration. Words alone can be effective in certain cases. If you are appealing to the intelligent and educated members of the community a very great deal can be done with words, but the further you get down the scale, or, in other words, the bigger your

audience becomes, the more important it is to use the direct method of illustration.<sup>8</sup>

It is of course the case that images have a universal appeal, and particularly to those of limited education and literacy who might find dense text intimidating. However, this observation was not simply a euphemism for the observation that 'uneducated people like looking at pictures'. It pointed to a phenomenon specific to the 1930s: increased mass visual literacy. In the 1930s, more and more visual media were available to a wide public: advertising hoardings brought images on to the street, the cinema offered visual entertainment, cheap illustrated publications achieved unprecedentedly large circulation. As Le Mahieu has observed in his authoritative history of the mass culture of the period, 'With the simultaneous rise of both cinema and the popular national daily press, mass-produced images became a central part of cultural life in Britain.'<sup>9</sup> Crucially, both these forms of mass-produced images were photographic.

A critic writing in 1934 described forms of commercial design which harnessed popular visual literacy as the 'new heraldry'.<sup>10</sup> The phrase is an extraordinarily potent one: heraldry in its literal sense was a complex visual language which encoded sophisticated ideas in a series of established signs. It could only be decoded by those educated in the meaning of its signs, but was nevertheless widely understood. To apply the term 'heraldry' to contemporary commercial design implied that the public were to be similarly educated in its codes, that new designs contained fixed messages which would be *correctly* decoded. Photographic Advertising's work may be said to be typical of this new heraldry in that it aimed to use visual modes with which the public were familiar.

Photographic Advertising occupies a particularly significant place in the history of visual literacy because its founder had been a staff photographer for the *Daily Mirror*. Popular newspapers did much to habituate the public to looking at photographs and the *Daily Mirror* was the most important pioneer of a style of photojournalism in which image and text were interdependent. *Picture Post*, published from 1938, represents

the apotheosis of this form and its success was an indication of the widespread accessibility of an amalgam of image and text. In the introduction to a publicity brochure for Photographic Advertising, Mewes set out his understanding of the development of visual literacy and the influence of illustrated newspapers on photography in advertising:

Far back in the recesses of human history, a cave man wanted to tell the world the story of some mighty battle or some grim struggle with the beasts of the jungle. Knowing no alphabet, he drew a crude representation of the event on a smooth face of rock. It was the forerunner of the 'picture writing' of to-day—the myriad illustrated books and papers that record the events of everyday life in every quarter of the globe. Yet, it is within comparatively recent years that this characteristic feature of modern life, with its roots deep in the past, has developed into a great power. It was in 1842 that the first illustrated paper was published in London—the *Illustrated London News*. Twenty-seven years later came the *Graphic* and, after another long interval, the *Daily Graphic*. Not until 1903 did the *Daily Mirror* appear, first as a tentative experiment to win the 'woman's interest' but soon to become a popular paper, with the day's news in pictures, appealing to all the world and his wife. Others followed and, now, the leading London dailies devote whole pages to photography, while the Sunday and Provincial press freely scatter photographs throughout their editorial columns.

Photographic news brought photographic advertising and a public that had been educated to visualise the world's events soon began to visualise its own needs. The camera has created a sixth sense and, to-day, few advertising schemes are complete that do not make use of the photographer's art.<sup>11</sup>

To say that Photographic Advertising and agencies like them benefited from the growth of news photography is not to say that they necessarily used styles based on news photography. It was more that Mewes's experience at the *Daily Mirror* enabled him to appropriate journalistic methods of conveying narrative through a combination of image and text. Photographic Advertising used a studio-based style, and their realistic aesthetic was influenced by another popular visual medium: cinema.

## Cinema and Visual Literacy

Estimates of cinema audience size before 1940 are notoriously inaccurate, and it is difficult to say whether the audiences actually increased in the 1930s. However, it was certainly the case that the character of the cinema-going experience altered and that cinema extended its reach to more people. The cinema shook off some of the disreputable associations which had formerly dogged it, and cinema-going was enjoyed by a wide-range of people.<sup>12</sup> While cinemas were still predominantly urban, distribution of cinemas across the country became less uneven. Many small cinemas could not afford the costs of changing to sound and larger cinemas, often part of a chain, became the norm. A moderately reliable estimate suggests that 18.5 million people visited the cinema every week in 1934, and that many of these visited more than once.<sup>13</sup>

Photographs were an important element of newspapers but cinema was a wholly photographic form. As such, it offered ready-made and widely accessible visual vocabularies for photographers. Moreover, photographers who used cinematic conventions could appropriate the cultural prestige and authority of cinema to their own work. The German critic and photographer Errell writing in 1929 saw the accessibility of photography as synonymous with the accessibility of film:

Painting today is a fine sport for the few, while photography exerts on even the most primitive individuals the same aesthetic power as once found its expression in the song and the dance. The participation of the masses in the present-day developments in painting is scarcely conceivable, but Charlie Chaplin evokes the laughter and tears of men and women of five continents.<sup>14</sup>

An important aspect of Errell's remark here is the international accessibility he implies. The conventions of film were an international visual language: this degree of cultural neutrality and acceptability in different countries had not yet been achieved by any one style of photography. Photographic Advertising's cinematic style appropriated this international currency for its own photographs and facilitated their international sale.

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Parallels with cinema were also apparent in the studio methods of commercial photographers. Photographs taken in the studio of Photographic Advertising Limited [3] were used in *Advertising Display* to illustrate the influence of film production on photographic studio practice:

Advertising photographic studios resemble miniature 'Hollywoods'. The camera equipment, the 'sets', the complicated lighting systems, the crowds of 'actors' make the ordinary visitor think that he has strayed into a full-blown film studio. They are, in fact, film studios on the small scale, and the methods of production used are similar to those of the film producer

...<sup>15</sup>

Certain specific devices common in the work of Photographic Advertising may be traced to contemporary cinema. These include very deep sha-

dows and, most obviously, the use of close-ups in portraits. Portraits in advertising photographs from 1900 to 1920 are, for the most part, just that: portraits influenced by traditions of studio portraiture, showing satisfied users of the product in formal poses. By the 1930s, images of the human face were using more relaxed and dramatic forms, and the transition may be explained by reference to cinema. The cinematic influence is apparent in a Horlick's advertisement from 1931 [4]. The photograph draws on a kind of realism, but is far from naturalistic. The model has heavy, Hollywood-style make-up, with accentuated mascara and lipstick. Her hair is perfectly curled in spite of the fact that she is supposedly experiencing deep Horlick's-induced sleep. Both the use of the close-up and the 'glamour' of the presentation owe a debt to cinema.



3 Photographic Advertising stock photograph, used to illustrate *Advertising Display* article

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4 Horlick's advertisement, taken from the Daily Herald, 2 January 1931

# For ENERGY all day and every day

## — Sound Sleep is essential

**It is DEEP SLEEP that rests the tired system, specialists say**

**A**FTER a long busy day what a relief it is to jump into bed and drop effortlessly and peacefully asleep . . . Sound sleep is sleep from which one awakes rested and full of energy. That's how we should feel in the morning! Actually statistics show that 7 out of every 10 people fail to get their full share of restful sleep!

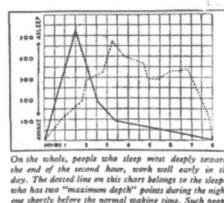
For sleep is not measured by time alone, scientists tell us — only sound sleep, they say, brings complete relaxation to a tired body and brain.

There's an easy way of ensuring sound sleep — by drinking a cupful of hot Horlick's Malted Milk at bedtime. Its warmth and generous nourishment soothe and satisfy your whole system. A feeling of drowsiness steals over you — and soon you sink into a profound, natural sleep.

### Restores your energy!

Because Horlick's is partially predigested through a special process of manufacture, it is very easy to assimilate. And while you sleep, the rich nutriment it contains builds up your system with fresh stores of energy.

Chemists and grocers everywhere have Horlick's in sealed glass bottles in four sizes, also the Horlick's Mixer. Ask, too, for the Malted Milk Tablets.



On the whole, people who sleep most deeply towards the end of the second hour, work well early in the day. The upper line on this graph belongs to the sleeper who has two "normal sleep depths" — sleeping the first one shortly before the normal waking time. Such people are frequently sleepy in the morning.



"FOR various reasons I had to give up running and all outdoor sports. The result was that my health suffered and I was unable to sleep. I therefore bought some Chocolate Flavoured Horlick's and had it instead of my usual cocoa at 9.30 p.m. I am pleased to say that I am now able to 'turn-in' at 10.0 and almost immediately fall asleep."

MR. S. J. WATSON, Paroles Road, Highgate, N.19



**HORICK'S** PLAIN OR CHOCOLATE FLAVOURED

MADE IN ENGLAND

Cinematic narrative tended to have an emotional rather than an intellectual structure, and indeed it was the emotional—sensational, to its critics—nature of contemporary cinema which occasioned much of the condemnation it still attracted from intellectual quarters. Cinematography developed visual shorthands for certain emotions and conventional ways of expressing certain powerful feelings, such as the close-up. Photographic Advertising appropriated these techni-

ques to produce emotionally based advertising photographs, which followed the recommendations of many contemporary critics:

[The advertising photographer] must learn to play upon mankind's known strengths and frailties as a Heifetz plays on a Stradivarius. Emotionalism is his bow—his strings are human sympathies, loves, and fears; parental and sexual love; the major fears of old age; illness and destitution; the many vanities inherent in keeping up appearances; the underlying strata of

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snobbishness from which few men are free; the all-pervading desire for possession. A photograph is commissioned either to appeal to or to threaten subtly one or another.<sup>16</sup>

The camera artist must know better than anyone else in the studio what should be done and how to do it. He must appreciate the emotions of a nursing mother or those of a polo player. He can never know enough about people and the things they do and feel.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas modernist advertising photography characteristically depicted a product, Photographic Advertising's work focused on individuals or on atmosphere and settings. The new visual rhetorics of cinema were ideally suited to this subject matter. However, the subject matter itself was not new. Stock libraries were made possible by the fact that photographers could predict the *subjects* which advertisers might want, and offer new ways of presenting them. Stock photography depended upon the use of stock arguments and stock forms of advertising. In the 1930s, a large proportion of advertisements made use of certain repeated formulae such as the testimonial and the before-and-after advertisement. These formats not only achieved ubiquity, but also longevity, enabling stock photographers to build up a library of images which would have a long shelf-life. In the Photographic Advertising sales ledgers, a surprising number of images were sold over a period of two or three decades, first in the 1930s, then again in the 1940s and 1950s. Some of these formats also had a long history. A 1920s advertising manual offers a manifesto for stock advertising, advocating the use of many forms still common in the 1930s. *A Textbook of Advertisement Writing and Designing* by B. C. Woodcock, published in 1922, was intended as a textbook for lecturers, a self-teaching manual, and a reference book for those working in the profession. Woodcock's central premise was that there were styles of advertising and certain formulae which were universally appropriate: 'This book will suggest something that can be written, something that can be illustrated, and some style that can be applied to any subject that any one could possibly wish to advertise.'<sup>18</sup>

Woodcock was candid about the use of stock phrases and strategies: for him, *all* advertising consisted of recomposing the same elements:

[The student of Advertising] must analyse the subject in order to discover the materials and elements of which it is composed and the principles which underlie its construction. Having discovered these materials, elements and principles he must then rearrange and reunite them to produce new compounds; in other words he must synthesise into the desired form the components which have been brought under his control.<sup>19</sup>

One of the traditional forms advocated by Woodcock was the testimonial:

1. Photograph or drawing of any pretty child. Underneath, in type or script, an imaginary conversation (the child supposed to be speaking). 'Daddy says that Blank's food is making me such a bonny girl that he is going to take my photograph and put it in the papers so that other little girls will know how to get big and strong like me.'<sup>20</sup>

Stock libraries such as Photographic Advertising specialized in precisely the kind of anonymous image required here: *any pretty child* [5]. A large proportion of images in Photographic Advertising's stock library, possibly about 20 per cent, were simple portraits: heads or full length shots of women, men, and children with little in the way of contextualization. Perhaps another 60 per cent were based on a portrait format: models shown in a setting such as a sitting room, a cocktail bar, a beach, either in overt poses or pictured engaged in an activity, as if captured unawares.

Testimonial-style advertising offered a market for both these kinds of images. Testimonial advertising had a long history and appeared in many guises. The two examples given here [6–7] offer many points of contrast. The Craven A advertisement came five years later than the Quaker Oats advertisement, but I do not intend them to illustrate a teleological progression. More laboured and stilted advertisements such as that for Quaker Oats could certainly still be found in 1935. In that advertisement, although the boy is particularized as a schoolboy, the photographs are essentially portraits. The photographs are undramatic and rely on the text to explicate them: they function as illustrations. The layout is dull and unimaginative. By contrast, the Craven A advertisement has less text and a more dynamic image, making use of dramatic devices such as shadow



5 Photographic Advertising stock photograph

and close-up. The layout is more lively, structured around a diagonal axis, and exploiting informal devices such as the handwritten message. The reader is expected to make the connection between the desirable image and the handwritten statement: an *implied* testimonial. The photograph is much more important because it has to convey the ideas explained in the verbose text of the Quaker Oats advertisement: '... writes Mrs. Hunt of London.' It is able to do so because it taps into new visual rhetorics. The use of such abbreviated forms of advertising indicates a sophisticated, visually literate audience.

Whereas the testimonial was a tried and tested formula, adapted to suit current conditions, other forms prominent in the 1930s were connected more specifically to social and economic conditions of the time. In an apparent paradox, the

1930s were a decade of world-wide depression yet were 'the golden age of advertising'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, there is a sound economic explanation for booming advertising during a depression; advertising increases not in spite of economic turmoil but because of it. Producers need to sell harder. Moreover, the purchase of small luxuries—the fast-moving consumer goods which were the subject of much advertising—increases when customers cannot afford larger luxuries.

In Britain, the worst effects of the Depression were localized in certain regions which had previously relied on heavy industry; some regions were largely unaffected. South Wales and the North East of England experienced unemployment of over 50 per cent, whereas areas supporting new light industry such as the South East and Midlands saw economic growth, and an increase



## "Now my boy has risen to third in his form"

*His mother found how vital a good  
breakfast is to success in school*

"My boy always used to be low in his classes," writes Mrs. Hunt of London. "Since I gave him Quaker Oats for breakfast he has risen to third in his form. He is twice the boy he was."

### Childhood's need— abundant energy

For breakfast — the first meal of the day — children need food that gives abundant energy, vitality, stamina. Nothing can take the place of Quaker Oats — Nature's own delicious "en-

ergy" breakfast. The world's finest oats, grown and ripened under sunny skies.

### The 4 essentials to health

Rich in everything essential to health and vitality. Rich in proteins, carbohydrates, minerals and vitamins. Builds muscle and bone, promotes growth and supplies extra energy.

Quaker Oats is easily digested, delicious, economical. No other oats have the same "delicious" flavour and goodness. Or give so much satisfying, sustaining nourishment.

*Quaker Oats is easily digested, delicious, economical. No other oats have the same creamy flavour and goodness.*

*Two kinds—Quaker Oats and Quick Quaker. Both made in Canada. Sold at all grocers' in two sizes — 4½d. and 9½d. per packet, except in the Irish Free State.*



## Quaker Oats builds up stamina

6 Quaker Oats advertisement, taken from the *Daily Herald*, 16 January 1930

in population as people moved into the region and into new suburbs of semi-detached housing. The upheaval of the Depression created a class of newly affluent consumers who, along with the established middle class, were largely cushioned



\* MADE SPECIALLY TO PREVENT SORE THROATS \*

CARRERAS LTD. — 150 years' Reputation for Quality

10 for 6d. 20 for 1/-

7 Craven A advertisement, taken from the *Daily Herald*, 6 September 1935

from the worst effects of the slump. They became the new purchasers of consumer goods, and an important market, targeted by many of the companies which bought Photographic Advertising's images.

Advertisers believed that the social mobility of these new consumers had generated a feeling of insecurity. Advertisements sought to harness this insecurity, either by presenting aspirational images of middle-class homes or by using negative scenarios of the shame and fear brought about by individuals' failure to meet the new standards required of them. Photographic Advertising's detailed social settings suit aspirational advertising, without being so opulent as to alienate potential consumers. The families in these room sets play out comforting, stereotyped roles [8]. These images could be used by advertisers to



8 Photographic Advertising stock photograph

associate a whole set of values, social codes, and a very precise rung on the social ladder with the product.

In a sense, by developing a style which offered encoded summaries of values and emotions which an advertiser could then associate with a product, Photographic Advertising made a virtue of necessity. Stock libraries could supply such images successfully but obviously could not offer images more specifically related to a product. However, this should not obscure the significance of the use of this style of advertising. In Photographic Advertising's images we see the beginning of 'lifestyle advertising', a genre usually regarded as originating in the 1950s. In the following passage from 1932 an advertising practitioner argues that one should not sell products so much as the intangible pleasures asso-

ciated with them, clearly a gesture towards lifestyle advertising:

Advertising is dealing largely with imponderables. You do not sell cars, you sell the joys of motoring. You do not sell wireless, you sell listening-in. You do not sell things like silver and glass as silver and glass, you sell social seamliness and bright modern homes.<sup>22</sup>

The opposite of aspirational advertising is that which plays upon fear of social failure, sometimes described as 'insecurity advertising'. In the 1930s, these advertisements commonly took the form of a narrative strip cartoon using either drawings or photographs. The narrative revolved around an individual suffering the terrors of social inadequacy and failure, manifested in anything from constipated children to missed promotion at work. This individual was seen being advised



9 Rinso advertisement, taken from the *Daily Herald*, 5 September 1935. The text tells how the young woman avoids disgrace in front of her mother-in-law by using Rinso to return the sheets to their original snowy whiteness

O

J

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by a more enlightened friend or an authority figure of a product which would overcome the problem and the advertisements ended with success and optimism. Products advertised in this way ranged from California Syrup of Figs to Rinso [9]. The prevalence of these advertisements was certainly connected with social instability and the feelings of insecurity engendered by the loss of old social structures: the kindly friend featured in so many of these advertisements represented real friends and mentors perhaps recently lost by many customers in the target market. Photographic Advertising had many images in their library which would have been suitable for this format of advertising, including images of people in pain, people expressing anxiety or relief, or offering comfort to a friend [10].

Some 1950s television advertisements chose to sell 'social seemliness' by using similar techniques to Photographic Advertising: associating precise social details with a product by using detailed sets and props. Memorable examples of this include the Babycham advertisements, credited with doing much to make it acceptable for women to order drinks in public bars. Other styles of television advertising also drew on techniques established in press advertisements of the 1930s. The first ever British television advertisement, for Gibbs SR toothpaste, was very like 1930s press advertising such as the Horlick's advertisement (see [4]), with its combination of photographs, text, and graph. Its famous opening image of a toothbrush and toothpaste frozen in a block of ice gave way to graphs and scientific jargon. It was



10 Photographic Advertising stock photograph

essentially a moving 1930s press advertisement and this is true of much early television advertising in Britain.

Some commentators have classified much contemporary advertising as post-modern, in that it often subverts advertising conventions and is parodic and self-referential. However, to describe these techniques as post-modern is misleading, since they can also be found in 1930s advertising. Post-modern advertising is said to indicate a sophisticated, 'advertising literate' audience. By the same token, the use of parody in advertising in the 1930s suggests a considerable degree of sophistication in at least some of its audience. As with all forms of advertising, the question of an audience's response is largely a matter of speculation, but certainly advertisers seem to have taken account of the audience's capacity for subversion. In 1938, the London Press Exchange used two campaigns of 'parody' advertisements for Greys cigarettes.<sup>23</sup> The first group of these simply mocked a *general* tendency to exaggeration among advertisers. In contrast to other manufacturer's inflated claims, the advertisements ended 'we merely maintain that Greys cigarettes are very good cigarettes'. The campaign was clearly designed to attract sceptical, advertising-saturated customers. A second, more explicit, series parodied specific campaigns, including an Eno's Fruit Salts 'before and after' advertisement and the Beecham's Pills 'Can you do this?' campaign which featured models touching their toes with a cheerful smile. These targets were very prominent advertisers who were using familiar and well-worn forms. The advertisers recognized the audience's capacity to subvert their messages and attempted to harness those powers of subversion humorously for their own ends. In the new style of advertising, the new heraldry, the advertisers relied on the audience to take an active role in creating meaning. However, the audience's active role also enabled them to subvert advertisers' intended meanings.

## Conclusion

Photographic Advertising took realistic photographs, suited to traditional advertising forms. It attempted to tailor its images to its audience by

using popular visual forms. Its work relied on an audience's familiarity with certain visual forms, on an audience's sophisticated, but still limited, visual literacy. The very phenomenon of widespread visual literacy which enabled Photographic Advertising's success may also be said to have limited it. As visual literacy among the public increased, the audience became more and more capable of challenging offered meanings. We have already seen in the Greys cigarette campaign that advertisers themselves were acknowledging the possibility of subversion and playing on the distance which some readers might place between themselves and the advertiser. The Second World War was a hiatus in the development of advertising: although advertising did not stop during the war, the advertising of the period effectively constitutes an entirely separate phenomenon. When the economy began to recover, and pre-war products became available in the 1950s, advertising began to move on. Advertisers gradually left behind the detailed settings of the 1930s. The 1950s saw the development of the kind of lifestyle advertising practised by Photographic Advertising, but in television advertising rather than the press, whose advertising became rather more pared down, almost 'reminder' advertising for an audience which, it was assumed, would already have seen the product advertised on television. Photographic Advertising produced fewer images for advertising in the 1950s, concentrating instead on magazines and catalogue illustration. Advertisers still wanted the kinds of images Photographic Advertising supplied in the 1930s, but they wanted them to move.

As the work of Photographic Advertising and the context of its use suggest, 1930s advertising was more sophisticated than is generally supposed both in terms of the professional structures of the industry, and in the kinds of advertising used. The success of Photographic Advertising in a specific time and a specific style is an important indicator of trends in advertising photography in the inter-war period.

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## Notes

Anyone with a research interest in the field who wishes to consult the Photographic Advertising archive should contact the Head of Collections at the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television. I should like to thank the staff of the Collections Department at the NMPFT for their support of my research there. I should also like to express my gratitude to the following companies and organizations for their permission to reproduce advertising material: Lever Brothers Limited, Rothmans UK Limited, Smith Kline Beecham Consumer Healthcare, Ogilvy & Mather Advertising, Outspan, and Syndication International.

- 1 G. J. Freshwater, 'Top of the basket', *Advertising Display*, March 1931, p. 143.
- 2 E. Searle Austin, 'The £. s. d. of advertising photography', *Advertising Monthly*, January 1938, p. 37.
- 3 Anon., 'Charles Ogle: the camera as the artist's influence', *Gebrauchsgraphik*, vol. 8, no. 10, 1931, p. 25.
- 4 W. Crawford, 'What gives our dreams their daring is that they can be realised', *Modern Publicity*, 1930, p. 18.
- 5 Very little secondary information survives in the Photographic Advertising archive. The material in this section has been gathered from searches at Companies House, references to the company and advertisements placed by them in contemporary professional journals, and an interview with the grandsons of the company's founder, George Mewes. I am grateful to Harold and David Mewes for sharing their memories of the company with me and for allowing me to use this information in print.
- 6 Searle Austin, op. cit., p. 39.
- 7 G. Stapely, 'Photography and the artist', *The Artist*, vol. XVII, 1939, p. 61.
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- 9 D. Le Mahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 80.
- 10 F. A. Mercer & W. Gaunt, 'Packs, cartons and containers: the new heraldry', *Modern Publicity*, 1934-5, p. 120.
- 11 This publicity brochure is part of the collection of Photographic Advertising material held by David Mewes, and I am grateful for his allowing me access to it.
- 12 J. Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-39*, Routledge, London, 1984.
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- 18 B. C. Woodcock, *A Textbook of Advertising and Designing*, Constable, London, 1922, p. xiii.
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- 21 T. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History*, Heinemann (on behalf of the History of Advertising Trust), London, 1982.
- 22 A. G. Willis, 'Photography in advertising', *Journal of the Royal Photographic Society*, April 1932, pp. 164-5.
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